

BY TIM MITCHELL, FUND DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR, CENTRACARE

The Longitudinal

CentraCare, with center locations in Battle Creek and Kalamazoo, is quickly becoming well known in our region as a leader in geriatric healthcare. However, one of the things not so well known is the fact that this vital non-profit organization has also developed a very unique and comprehensive educational program in cooperation with the Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine to train all new medical students. In fact, this program is likely the only one of its kind in the entire country.

Since the first few participants entered the doors in 2009, CentraCare has provided outstanding healthcare, enabling seniors to remain in their homes for as long as possible, using the unique PACE (Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly) model of care, a program only found in 250 communities in the United States. Today, CentraCare serves nearly 400 participants throughout Calhoun, Kalamazoo, and eastern Van Buren counties.

Through this model CentraCare coordinates and provides care for the at-risk frail elderly population of our community through an integrated team of health care professionals made up of medical doctors, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, registered nurses, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, recreational therapists, dietitians, and medical social workers



Left to Right: WMed Students Gina Bravata, Conner Ahlgren, and CentraCare participant Dorothy Penny.

all under one roof. This team meets daily to assess the complex health and social needs of the participants and to make any necessary adjustments to the personalized care plan for each individual. Additional medical specialties such as audiology, dentistry, optometry, and podiatry are also offered. CentraCare's in-house day center, medical clinic and therapy rooms make it highly convenient for participants to receive the socialization they need as well as comprehensive medical care under one roof.

As specialists in caring for the frail elderly, CentraCare is keenly aware of the significant shortage of geriatric physicians throughout the country and Michigan is no exception. In fact, this concern is being voiced throughout the geriatric community. Nancy Lundebjerg, chief executive officer of the American Geriatrics Society (AGS), alluded to the magnitude of this shortage when she said, "People

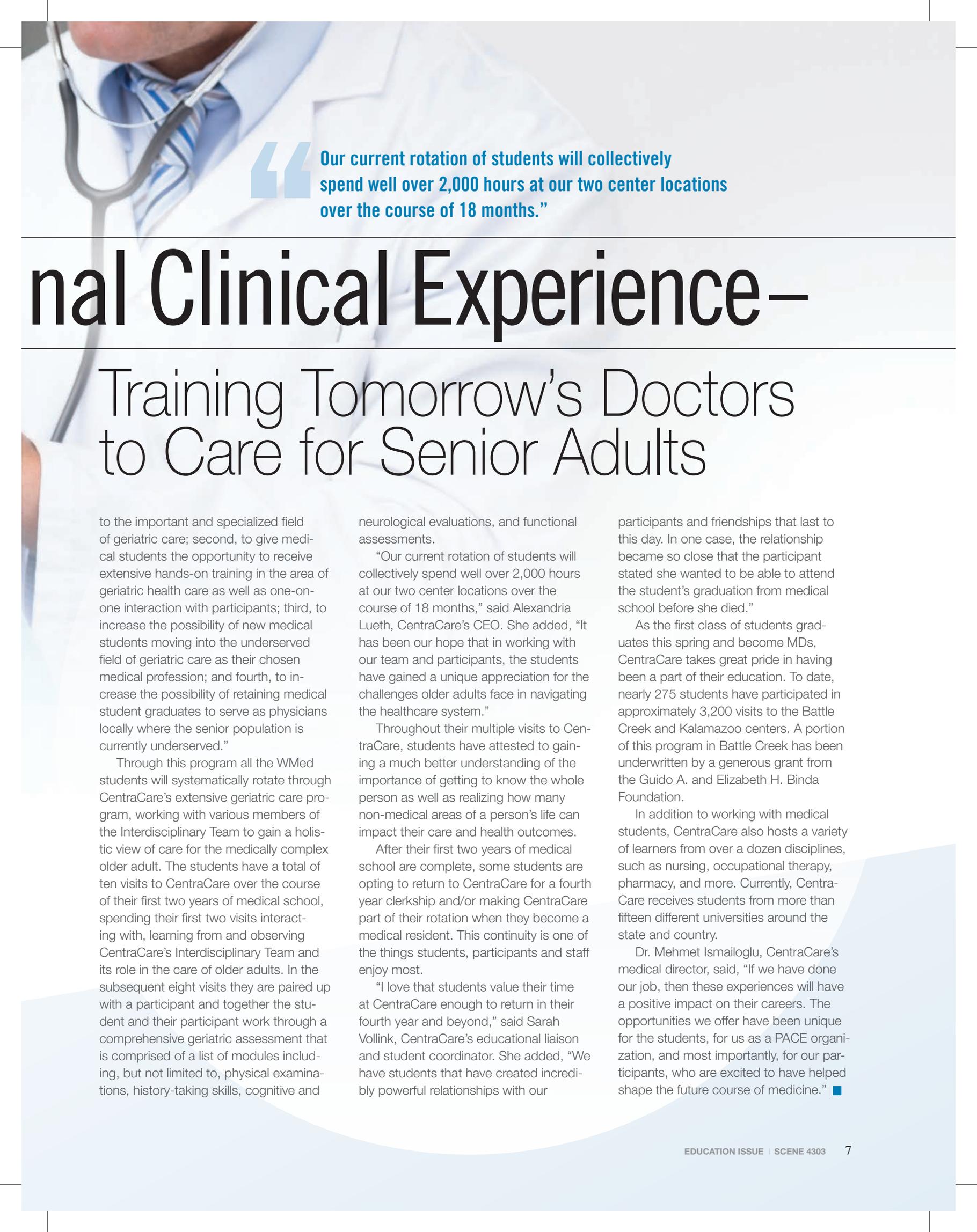
who really need the services of a geriatrician won't necessarily have access to that kind of expertise. That's probably true right now across the country."

Dr. Heather Whitson, associate professor of Medicine at the Duke University School of Medicine concurs with this assessment and shares this opinion; "We are not prepared as a nation. We are facing a crisis. Our current health care system is ill equipped to provide the optimal care experience for patients with multiple chronic conditions or with functional limitations and disabilities."

Currently, there are more than 7,500 certified geriatricians in the United States. But the nation needs an estimated 17,000 geriatricians to care for about 12 million older Americans, according to AGS projections.

To address this need, in 2014 CentraCare established the *Longitudinal Clinical Experience*, an educational program in cooperation with Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine (WMed), to provide a unique clinical experience in the field of geriatrics for all the WMed students over the course of their first and second years of medical school.

According to Laura Ferrara, CentraCare's chief strategy officer, the program has a four-fold purpose, "First, to expose first and second year medical students



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Training Tomorrow’s Doctors to Care for Senior Adults

to the important and specialized field of geriatric care; second, to give medical students the opportunity to receive extensive hands-on training in the area of geriatric health care as well as one-on-one interaction with participants; third, to increase the possibility of new medical students moving into the underserved field of geriatric care as their chosen medical profession; and fourth, to increase the possibility of retaining medical student graduates to serve as physicians locally where the senior population is currently underserved.”

Through this program all the WMed students will systematically rotate through CentraCare’s extensive geriatric care program, working with various members of the Interdisciplinary Team to gain a holistic view of care for the medically complex older adult. The students have a total of ten visits to CentraCare over the course of their first two years of medical school, spending their first two visits interacting with, learning from and observing CentraCare’s Interdisciplinary Team and its role in the care of older adults. In the subsequent eight visits they are paired up with a participant and together the student and their participant work through a comprehensive geriatric assessment that is comprised of a list of modules including, but not limited to, physical examinations, history-taking skills, cognitive and

neurological evaluations, and functional assessments.

“Our current rotation of students will collectively spend well over 2,000 hours at our two center locations over the course of 18 months,” said Alexandria Lueth, CentraCare’s CEO. She added, “It has been our hope that in working with our team and participants, the students have gained a unique appreciation for the challenges older adults face in navigating the healthcare system.”

Throughout their multiple visits to CentraCare, students have attested to gaining a much better understanding of the importance of getting to know the whole person as well as realizing how many non-medical areas of a person’s life can impact their care and health outcomes.

After their first two years of medical school are complete, some students are opting to return to CentraCare for a fourth year clerkship and/or making CentraCare part of their rotation when they become a medical resident. This continuity is one of the things students, participants and staff enjoy most.

“I love that students value their time at CentraCare enough to return in their fourth year and beyond,” said Sarah Vollink, CentraCare’s educational liaison and student coordinator. She added, “We have students that have created incredibly powerful relationships with our

participants and friendships that last to this day. In one case, the relationship became so close that the participant stated she wanted to be able to attend the student’s graduation from medical school before she died.”

As the first class of students graduates this spring and become MDs, CentraCare takes great pride in having been a part of their education. To date, nearly 275 students have participated in approximately 3,200 visits to the Battle Creek and Kalamazoo centers. A portion of this program in Battle Creek has been underwritten by a generous grant from the Guido A. and Elizabeth H. Binda Foundation.

In addition to working with medical students, CentraCare also hosts a variety of learners from over a dozen disciplines, such as nursing, occupational therapy, pharmacy, and more. Currently, CentraCare receives students from more than fifteen different universities around the state and country.

Dr. Mehmet Ismailoglu, CentraCare’s medical director, said, “If we have done our job, then these experiences will have a positive impact on their careers. The opportunities we offer have been unique for the students, for us as a PACE organization, and most importantly, for our participants, who are excited to have helped shape the future course of medicine.” ■